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Bill Would Permit Bureaucrats to Campaign

By Judith Havemann
Washington Post Staff Writer

A dramatic revision of the Hatch Act, which would free federal workers to run for office, support political parties and raise money for candidates on their own time, is on a fast track in the House with the support of all but one of the 22 members Post Office and Civil Service Committee.

The bill, sponsored by Rep. William L. Clay (D-Mo.), prohibits political activities while civil servants are on duty, in federal buildings or vehicles or in uniform. But it would allow federal employees to engage in any legal political activity off the job, according to Clay, and would prohibit supervisors from pressuring subordinates to participate or contribute.

A spokesman for Constance Horner, director of the Office of Personnel Management, said the administration is studying the bill. Horner testified in June that a similar bill would politicize the federal government "to an extent unprecedented in recent American history."

The extent of Senate support for the measure is uncertain. But testimony from witnesses during hearings this summer on two earlier, similar bills suggested that the furor that arose when Democrats tried to revise the act 11 years ago will not be repeated.

"I think it's time that some revisions should be made in all fairness to federal employees," said Rep. Gene Taylor (R-Mo.), ranking minority member of the committee. He said both House Minority Leader Robert H. Michel (R-Ill.) and Minority Whip Trent Lott (R-Miss.) favor revising the Hatch Act, which bars civil servants from most partisan political activity.

The bill is scheduled to be reported out of the committee Tuesday, but Taylor said he has asked Chairman William D. Ford (D-Mich.) for time to try to reach a consensus with the administration.

The Hatch Act was passed in 1939 in part to prevent the Democrats from using their public jobs to extract political contributions. The sticking point in previous revision attempts has been how to



REP. WILLIAM L. CLAY
... "a significant breakthrough"

protect workers who do not wish to participate in politics or in a particular political campaign from being coerced into doing so.

Clay's bill would prohibit federal employees from giving, receiving or soliciting political contributions "from or to a superior." Federal employees also would be barred from accepting political contributions from contractors or industries that are regulated by the employee's agency.

Clay's bill had 126 sponsors when it was introduced Thursday. It covers both civil servants and postal workers.

"Three million federal and postal employees have been improperly and unconscionably denied the ability to participate in the political process," Clay said in a statement. "The broad support this legislation enjoys... is a significant breakthrough."

Some people object to revising the Hatch Act for fear it would turn the 2.1 million civil servants and 800,000 postal workers into an action arm of the Democratic Party. "Probably most of them are Democrats," Taylor laughed, "and I may be hurting my own cause."

"I think you must assume some opposition," he said, "but when people think it through, I think they will realize that [the Hatch Act] is just not fair."

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Revising the Hatch Act

By Mike Causey
Washington Post Staff Writer

I imagine watching a news conference of a candidate for mayor, Congress or president and later seeing the candidate in uniform putting mail in a box, processing a passport or Social Security claim, or auditing income tax!

Although none of the above is likely to happen, it could, under a bill the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee is expected to pass Tuesday.

The plan, by Rep. William L. Clay (D-Mo.), would give full political rights for the first time in memory to nearly 3 million federal workers, from Veterans Administration clerks to air traffic controllers, meat inspectors and Defense Department contract managers.

Clay's bill, strongly supported by federal and postal worker unions, would revamp the Hatch Act, which was passed in 1939 by a Congress that claimed that the Roosevelt administration was guilty of arm-twisting federal workers. In addition to barring politicians and supervisors from putting the arm on employees—for donations of time or money for partisan purposes—the law also bans employees from taking active roles in partisan political campaigns, as advisers, fund-raisers, vocal supporters or candidates.

Federal and postal unions can't strike and, except in the Postal Service, can't bargain over pay and fringe benefits. They have pushed for Hatch Act revision almost since the ink was dry on the law.

Their high-water mark came more than a decade ago. The Democrat-controlled House and Senate passed a revision bill only to have it vetoed by Republican President Ford.

Their low-water mark came a short time later when Democratic President Carter, who favored Hatch Act reform as a candidate, let it be known

that he would not be unhappy if the Senate, then controlled by Democrats, sat on a Hatch Act reform bill. It did.

This year, however, Hatch Act revampers think they have the momentum and votes. Clay's bill had more than 100 cosponsors when it was introduced last week. Committee approval is all but assured Tuesday. The House is expected to okay it, and key Senators have said they will begin work shortly. Although Senate passage this session is doubtful, the bill could be approved in 1988, an election year, and become law even over a presidential veto.

Under Clay's bill, off-duty federal workers could run for office, manage campaigns or raise money for a candidate or political party. As federal employees but minus job titles, they could endorse candidates.

The potential impact of Hatch Act changes, especially in this area with its 350,000 federal employees, is staggering.

Federal workers are among the nation's best-paid, best-trained, best-educated workers. The typical federal employee earns \$27,000 a year outside Washington (here the average is more than \$32,000), has more years of education than most people, and had to pass qualifying and background tests to get his job.

Whether they are cogs in the wheel or major policy implementers, federal employees have jobs that often carry more power and responsibility than do those of their neighbors.

Arguments for and against revision are obvious: Isn't it a sin to make second-class citizens of these workers simply because they get federal paychecks? Or, what if this leads to a politicization of the civil service that makes today's office-politics buddy system seem like amateur night?

Love it or hate it, Hatch Act reform may be around the corner.